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INFO RUEHAH/AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT 0149
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SUBJECT: UZBEKISTAN: MEDIA REACTION TO SRAP HOLBROOKE VISIT

REF: ASTANA 260

11. (U) Summary: Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan (SRAP) Holbrooke's February 19th visit to Tashkent received prominent and concise coverage in the local media. One official article on the visit was published and then republished in several state media outlets. The visit was the lead story on Axborot, the country's flagship television news program. Axborot's coverage was positive in tone. Independent media offered little coverage of the visit. Local media devoted the most attention to the question of a U.S. military base in Uzbekistan. Coverage of the issue intensified after SRAP Holbrooke's comments on this issue on February 21st in Astana (reftel). End Summary.

State Newspaper Reports on Visit Limited and Neutral

12. (U) One article on SRAP Holbooke's visit was published in state media outlets. This article was first posted online by the National News Agency of Uzbekistan (Uza) and was then republished verbatim in several state media outlets. The story, along with photos, was carried on the front pages of the Uzbek-language daily Halq Sozi (People's Word), and its Russian-language sister publication, Narodnoye Slova (People's Word). (Note: Halq Sozi and Narodnoye Slova are Uzbekistan's two papers of records. Halq Sozi has a nationwide circulation of 50,500. Narodnoye Slovo's circulation is approximately 14,500 and tends to be more popular in the capital than in the regions. End Note.) The article and photos were also republished on the front page of Pravda Vostoka (Truth of the Orient). (Note: Pravda Vostoka is owned by the Cabinet of Ministers and has a circulation of approximately 16,100. End Note)

13. (U) Uza's article was concise and neutral in tone. One quarter of the article was devoted to describing the ways in which Uzbekistan is assisting in Afghanistan. The article highlighted that SRAP Holbrooke stressed Uzbekistan's importance in Afghanistan. The article's analysis of the meeting between President Karimov and SRAP Holbrooke was limited. The article stated that during his meeting with SRAP Holbrooke, President Karimov "expressed the attitude of the country towards the further development of Uzbek-American relations on a constructive basis." It did not, however, describe that "attitude." It also stated that "prospects of bilateral cooperation development...were discussed at the meeting," but did not describe those "prospects."

State Television Coverage of Visit Prominent and Positive

14. (U) Coverage of the visit was the lead story on Uzbek Television First Channel's evening news show Axborot (Report) on the evening of the visit, Friday February 19th. (Note: Government-owned, First Channel is the country's major source for information about government news, policies, and programs. Its flagship news show Axborot is widely considered to be among the best reflections of government policies. The show is broadcast in Uzbek and Russian, and has a viewership of over 10 million. End Note.) The station's coverage of the visit continued on Sunday February 21st with identical reporting on the visit. Coverage of the visit was the

second story in the broadcast on the 21st.

15. (U) Axborot's coverage of the visit was more explicitly positive than that of UzA. In its coverage, Axborot's correspondent stated that President Karimov "expressed Uzbekistan's firm commitment to further development of Uzbek-American relations on a constructive basis in the course of establishing durable peace and stability in Afghanistan." The coverage also included direct footage of President Karimov's welcoming SRAP Holbrooke to Uzbekistan.

Reporting and Speculation on a U.S. Military Base

16. (U) Several media reports on the visit focused on the question of a U.S. military base in Uzbekistan. (Note: On Sunday February 21st, SRAP Holbrooke was asked by a Reuters reporter in Astana whether the U.S. is planning to open a military base in Uzbekistan. SRAP Holbrooke replied: "Uzbekistan does provide us valuable opportunities to transit material to Afghanistan, and that's important. But a military base? No." SRAP Holbrooke's stop in Astana came two days after his visit to Tashkent. End Note.) Following SRAP Holbrooke's stop in Astana, Uzbekistan's pro-government website 12.uz published a short article entitled "The U.S. Will Not Place Its Military Base in Uzbekistan." The article quoted SRAP Holbrooke's above-noted comments on the questions of a base, and included his comments on the importance of the Manas Transit Center. The independent website Ferghana.ru similarly reported that the U.S. does not plan to reinstate a military base in Uzbekistan and quoted SRAP Holbrooke's comments on

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the issue. However, in an article published on February 19th, RFE/RL Uzbek Service suggested that the question of a base is still open. It asked whether SRAP Holbrooke's visit to Uzbekistan is the first step in a plan to reinstate a U.S. base. It also suggested that SRAP Holbrooke and President Karimov may have discussed the possibility of a base.

Independent Media Reaction to Visit

17. (U) Besides the articles on a U.S. base in Uzbekistan, there were only a few short reports on SRAP Holbrooke's visit by Uzbekistan's independent media. Uzmtronom.com, one of the most popular independent websites in Uzbekistan, offered a three sentence description of the visit, noting that the two sides discussed the situation in Afghanistan. Uznews.net, a website which describes itself as the "independent news service of Uzbekistan," posted only a one line story on the visit. Turanzamin.org, the blocked website of the Congress of Democratic Uzbekistan, posted an Uzbek-language translation of Embassy Tashkent's press release on the visit.

Comment

18. (U) Uzbek Television First Channel's rebroadcasting of its coverage of SRAP Holbrooke's visit was unusual. The rebroadcasting suggests that the GoU wanted to highlight the positive portrayal of the visit and emphasize President Karimov's "commitment to further development of Uzbek-American relations on a constructive basis." End Comment.

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